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Exploring the value of a risk-management quality-assurance model to support delivery of quality higher education in the conflict-affected northwest of Syria

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ABSTRACT

Universities worldwide are adopting quality-assurance programmes to improve the quality of their services, however, the value of Western quality-management models developed for stable contexts, in conflict-affected contexts is questionable. This study sought to review the quality management strategies, policies and practices of two higher education institutions (HEIs) in the non-regime conflict-affected northwest of Syria (NWS), selected as representative of the emerging HE sector in the area since 2015, and to explore the potential benefits of a risk-management approach to quality assurance, a model that places context at its heart to help mitigate identified risks that might undermine delivery of quality HE. A mixed-method approach, was adopted, combining an analysis of the two HEIs administrative documents, with fourteen semi-structured interviews with senior administrative and teaching staff, and a survey of 120 of their 2019/20 graduates. Findings indicated that a risk-management approach would allow HEIs in NWS to develop strategies, policies and practices that would better respond to their conflict-affected realities, and the need for a more transparent and democratic management approach to decision-making and management/staff/student relations and communication. A set of risk-management quality assurance recommendations are offered for consideration by all Syrian HEIs in NWS, to allow the development of management policies, strategies and practices that mitigate risks to delivery of quality HE services. Equally important is to acknowledge the resilience and adaptability of the two study universities, and their commitment to sustaining access to HE for local and displaced communities, despite ongoing insecurity and deteriorating economic and social conditions .

1. Introduction

In the context of higher education (HE) quality is seen as a vital and exciting challenge given its significance relative to knowledge creation and the development of a country's human-resources and social influence, in the form of its graduates (Papanthymou & Darra, 2017). Quality management (QM) is now deemed to be fundamental to HE quality across different countries and cultures. Although viewed by some as a Western imposed concept Couch (2020), QM is now commonly adopted by higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide as a strategy to ensure appropriate quality outputs that respond to societal needs. Al-Zoubi in his (2013) study on HE in Jordan, also considers that quality management in education can successfully address environmental risks in order to meet students' expectations and needs (Al-Zoubi, 2013).

A number of definitions of 'quality' are provided in earlier studies, most of which focus on customer satisfaction (for a summary, see Papanthymou & Darra, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the QM is defined as "the process, supported by policies and systems, used by an institution to maintain and enhance the quality of education experi-

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enced by its students and of the research undertaken by its staff" and quality assurance (QA) is defined as "the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organisation designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality" Harvey (2004).

Total quality management (TQM), is one of a number of quality management models currently used by HEIs, defined as a management approach that aims to achieve and sustain long-term organizational success by encouraging employee feedback and participation, satisfying customer needs and expectations, respecting societal values and beliefs, and obeying governmental statutes and regulations (Tzvetelin Gueorguiey, 2006). Al Ghawiel, in his recent 2021 study notes that although researchers have highlighted the benefits, others who have looked at TQM in relation to the efficiency of education systems have also pointed to its limitations in relation to personal development. He also "postulates that the education system is strongly dependant on the political and economic sphere" (Al Ghawiel, 2021: 4). Prior to 2011 and the start of the conflict, Syrian universities were amongst those establishing QM departments to support QM strategies, policies and practices; however, with no single model and differing levels of application, their effectiveness was highly variable (Syrian Republic Ministry of Higher Education Accreditation Directorate, 2005).[1]

To examine the dominant conceptualization of 'quality' in a conflict-affected context, Couch (2020) investigated HE in the context of Afghanistan, drawing on documents supplemented by semi-structured interviews. His-findings revealed concerns over the adoption of quality assurance models drawn from stable Western contexts and developed by international actors, with the notion of 'quality' often perceived as foreign concept and encountering notable resistance.

Existing studies categorise the main areas of risk faced by HEIs in fragile contexts as academic, strategic, financial, operational, and reputational (Raanan, 2009; Toma, Alexa, & Şarpe, 2014) (Huber, 2011 as cited in Tamrat and Teferra (2020). 'Academic' risks relate to teaching or research-related considerations such as desertion of faculty; 'strategic risks' affect an organisation's ability to achieve its goals; 'financial risks' may result in loss of assets, for example from falling student enrolment or competition; 'operational risks' may affect management processes; and 'compliance risks' may affect compliance with externally imposed laws and regulations, or internally imposed policies and procedures. These studies suggest that classifying and understanding these risks and their magnitude can allow stakeholders to address them, or at least to develop mitigation strategies. Understanding the issues that influence or hinder the success of QM is also crucial to improving its effectiveness.

With regard to universities operating in conflict-affected contexts, Muthanna and Sang (2018) found, in the case of Yemen, that internal and external armed conflicts (i.e., civil and border conflicts) led to brain drain from across the education sector, as a result of both insecurity and economic crisis, highlighting the loss of human resources as a major challenge to the delivery of quality HE. Although brain drain is seen as a threat to the home country, negatively affecting economic growth and education, it can also be positive, enhancing international communication and increasing scientific knowledge amongst scholars as they settle in other countries, whilst remaining connected to their home institutions (Muthanna & Sang, 2018).

Brain drain was also identified in regime-held areas of Syria Milton (2019) following economic decline. A cut in the 'national' HE budget led to a 65% to 80% fall in faculty members' salaries from around $1000/month to $200–300/month in the first two years of the crisis, despite teaching loads increasing from 10 to 12 h/week to 30–35 h/week. This, coupled with poor internet connection and electricity supplies, also affected the quality of both of the study institution's services. Milton notes that, despite these challenges, HEIs in regime-controlled areas continued to function, although at a lower capacity than in pre-war Syria, demonstrating both resilience and adaptability through the continued delivery of HE services. Conditions for the HEIs in non-regime NWS are considerably worse due to a fractured and unstable environment to which hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been displaced since the start of the conflict. (ASU, 2021)

Risk management is defined as "a planned and a structured process aimed at helping a 'project' team make the right decision at the right time to identify, classify, quantify the risks and then to manage and control them." Srinivas (2019). Effective identification of risks at the outset is key to successful risk management to allow a well-structured mitigation plan to be put in place. Srinivas also offers a combination of methods to identify risks, a model that would appear to be of potential value to senior university management/administrative teams in fragile contexts.

Modebelu and Anebi (2012) see effective institutional management as central to mitigating the risks affecting delivery of quality HE, necessitating the organisation and mobilisation of an institution's entire human (academic and non-academic staff), material (facilities etc.) and financial resources. Gulden et al. (2015) also suggest that to achieve this in a harmonised relaxed working environment requires cohesion across the entire university structure, i.e. departments, divisions, faculties and chairs, as well as administrative and teaching staff. Şen, Kabak, Tüysüz, & Kuzaliç (2012) point to the importance of democratic management practices, including democratic ownership, authority and responsibility, group decision-making, a horizontal network organizational structure, and the value of continual long-term employment within an institution. When applied simultaneously, these factors should promote delivery of high-quality education and the development of a high-quality university (Şen et al., 2012).

This study focused on two Syrian universities as representative of a post-2014 emerging HE-sector in the non-regime conflict-affected northwest Syria (NWS), in order to understand the challenges and risks faced, and how they might or do impact on the delivery of quality HE. In this paper, we consider a risk-management approach to QM for HEIs operating in high-risk complex contexts, as an alternative to standard Western QM models developed for stable environments. Drawing on the issues highlighted by interviews with the two universities' staff, a review of their core documents and a survey of their recent graduates, we argue that for any QM model to be of immediate relevance to HE communities in unstable environments, the conceptualisation of QM needs to locate context at its heart. We conclude that with risk as its entry point, a risk-management approach enables the development of QM strategies, policies and practices that are able to respond directly to, and are most likely to mitigate, the complex risks facing HEIs in fragile environments.

2. Study objective and research questions

Objective. To explore the potential benefits of a risk-management approach to quality assurance, a model that places context at its heart, as a more suitable model than the standard Western QM models developed for stable environments, in order to mitigate identified risks that might undermine the delivery of quality HE in a fragile and unstable context.

Two universities established since 2015 and deemed to be representative of the emerging HE sector in the non-regime conflict-affected northwest of Syria, were selected as case studies.

Questions.

i) What are the current quality management-related strategies, policies, regulations and practices in place in the two study universities?
ii) What challenges and risks potentially hinder the effectiveness of current quality management strategies, regulations, policies and practices – where these exist?

[1] The Experience of the Syrian Arab Republic in Quality and Academic Accreditation (2005), a report produced by the regime Ministry of HE Accreditation Directorate.

iii) How might current quality-assurance strategies be enhanced or what alternative models might be adopted to help mitigate immediate and future risks to the delivery of quality HE?

3. Methodology and methods

Mixed-method approach. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining an internal document review with semi-structured interviews and a student survey. The document review aimed to provide insights into the two study universities' strategies, policies and regulations and how these related to quality-assurance, and the semi-structured interviews and student survey provided both staff and graduate perspectives on the relevance and effectiveness of their respective institution's current strategies, policies, regulations and practices, as well as insights into their application or not in practice. Triangulation was used to corroborate or refute findings from each of the data sources Bowen (2009).

Ethical approval & confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the start of the study, and all data anonymised to maintain confidentiality. For reasons of anonymity, the two study universities are referred to as A and B throughout.

3.1. Document review (see Appendix A for a list of the documents reviewed)

A document review is a systematic procedure for evaluating documents, both printed and electronic – computer-based and Internet-transmitted (Bowen, 2009). The aim of the study's internal document review was to gain insights into, and an understanding of, the two universities' organizational and decision-making structures and processes, of any quality-management/quality-assurance-related strategies and policies, of administrative and procedural regulations that guide day-to-day operations and, of relations with external bodies, such as funders and authorities, as well as relations across the universities, i.e. management and teaching and administrative staff, and students. The document review also provided insights into the two institutions openness in terms of the documents that were shared and served to inform the semi-structured interviews and survey questions, providing a benchmark against which to measure actual implementation and practice, relevance to the effective day-to-day management and the functioning of both universities, and to enhancing the quality of their educational services.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Interviews. Due to both Covid19 and security concerns, the fourteen semi-structured interviews, carried out in 2020 with university staff, were conducted remotely in Arabic via Zoom, lasting for between thirty minutes and two hours, with an average duration of one hour. They involved both open and closed questions, followed by 'why?' or 'how?' questions as relevant Adams (2015) as well as questions pursuing new lines of enquiry to obtain more in-depth information on university practices in a conversational style.

Interviewee profiles. Interviews were held with 4 senior administrators, two from each of the study universities, selected to provide a broad representation and a comprehensive picture of current university practices; 3 heads of faculty and department (1 from A and 2 from B) selected for the same reasons; and 7 members of their teaching staff (3 from A and 4 from B), all PhD holders with both pre- and post-2011 teaching and research experience. Interviewees were all male, reflecting the limited number of female faculty members at the time of the study, and had all worked in regime universities since the start of the conflict before deciding to leave, having seen or experienced first-hand the risks of remaining, such as detention, conscription or worse.

Informed consent. The objective of the study was shared with interviewees and written consent obtained prior to the start of the interview.

3.3. Graduate-student survey

The online graduate-student survey was developed using KoboToolBox, with 10 multiple-choice questions focusing primarily on employment outcomes relative to respondents' HE qualifications, as an objective measure of the relevance and quality of their HE study, as well as a reflection of the university's understanding of local labour markets. The survey questionnaire link was emailed to all the 2019–2020 graduates from both the study universities. A total of 120 completed questionnaires were received, 94 from University A and 26 from University B, of which 40% female and 60% male, in line with the two universities' student gender divide. Respondents were able to choose more than one of the multiple-choice answers offered for each question but were obliged to answer all 10 of the survey questions.

3.4. Data analysis

The qualitative interview data were subject to thematic analysis, "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset." (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Excel was used to facilitate analysis of the quantitative data, to establish the number of respondents who were employed and the connection, if any, between the nature of their employment and their HE qualification.

3.5. Study limitations

The need to conduct interviews remotely due to Covid19, limited their number due to issues of connectivity and the benefit of non-verbal communications and interactions. The pandemic and geographical spread of the study team across Turkey, also forced the team to work and meet remotely, making communication and collaboration more difficult. The researchers also recognize the limitations of the study's graduate survey given its focus on employment outcomes and customer satisfaction, as measures of the quality of the education received, in the face of many other possible variables (such as curriculum, teaching quality, amongst others) or more direct measures with which the survey did not engage.

4. Findings and discussion

Although most Syrian universities in NWS were only established after the start of the crisis, they have attracted large numbers of students from amongst both local and displaced communities, leading to the development of an independent, albeit isolated, HE sector in this unstable area of Syria. Syrian universities in NWS, seven at the time of the study, are licenced and accredited by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)'s higher education legislative arm, the Higher Education Council (HEC), however the Syrian universities in NWS lack effective oversight and international recognition and accreditation. The lack of international accreditation affects the recognition of certificates issued by universities in NWS, impacting negatively on student transition to universities outside of Syria, as well as a lack of confidence amongst students and their parents in these institutions, and potentially impacting on registration and increasing the risk of the universities' financial insecurity.

It also lacks international connections due to the political complexities and realities of the area. Such complexities might easily have led to the sector's collapse as in the cases of Somalia Milton (2019), however, despite a context of multi-party warfare, foreign intervention and territorial fragmentation, HEIs in NWS continue to function, albeit with only a fraction of the capacity required to meet the pre-crisis 12% (female) and 17% (male) university-enrolment rates amongst Syrian youth (Zaatari, 2013).

4.1. Document review and qualitative interview data analysis: emerging themes

> "*One of the most important risks is the poor academic level of students. The catastrophic impact of having 3 semesters a year a year given that students' academic level was below the required standard. … No one thought of any solutions for the problem because no one has taken quality management into consideration."* (Interviewee 13, Uni B).

The following six themes emerged from the team's analysis of its internal document review and qualitative interview data: Theme 1. 'Quality-assurance strategies, policies, regulations, procedures and practices'; Theme 2. 'Governance (external and internal), decision-making bodies and process'; Theme 3. 'Appointment Processes and Transparency'; Theme 4. 'Financial Insecurity & Impact on Staffing'; Theme 5. 'Divergence between Policies and Procedures, and Practice'; and Theme 6. 'Research'.

The issues raised and discussed under each of the following themes also point to areas of risk. As mentioned earlier, identifying, classifying and quantifying risk is the first vital step to developing a risk-management strategy, by providing significant insights for stakeholders looking to develop mitigation strategies (Srinivas, 2019).

4.2. Theme 1. QM systems: strategies, policies, regulations, procedures and practices

> "*There is no quality management or assurance unit at the university and no understanding of the term quality management. They don't actually know how such a unit would work even if one were to be established.*' (Interviewee 5, Uni A).

All Syrian universities in NWS are licenced to operate by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)'s legislative body, the SIG Higher Education Council (HEC), which requires all HEC licenced universities to be compliant with its regulations. Licencing enables an HEI to start operating although without HEC accreditation. Academic accreditation is only granted by the SIG HEC following completion of their first academic year and a positive evaluation of their academic services.

To avoid delays in the set-up of new Syrian universities in NWS, the SIG adopted the Syrian-regime's *2006 Law 6 'Organization of Universities'*, as reflected in University A's governing document, which includes large extracts from the 2006 Law. Although there is no direct reference to Law 6 (2006) in University B's governing document, nevertheless the text captures the intent of Law 6.

> "*[University A's] Procedural Rules were drawn up in two stages: the first replicated the [regime] University of Aleppo's rules based on the 2006 Law 6 'Organization of Universities', followed by changes to remove the possibility of favouritism or partisanship. University A's Procedural Rules were prepared … and submitted to the [SIG] Ministry [of Education & Higher Education] for approval."* (Interviewee 10, Uni A).

The SIG also adopted the regime's United Nations (UN) accredited curricula. The decision to prioritise curricula that benefited from accreditation has subsequently hindered both institutions' ability to modify or develop their curricula to reflect their conflict-affected context. Although the universities do not benefit from the accreditation, nevertheless they and their students know that the curricula being taught has been internationally accredited, as well as its adoption providing continuity for the students whose studies were interrupted, following displacement from regime universities to NWS.

The document review established that, despite their desire to ensure the delivery of quality education, neither of the study HEIs had strategies nor policies relating explicitly to quality assurance, most likely a reflection that the 2006 regime Law 6 *Organization of Universities*, did not itself include QM reference and, as already noted, prior to the start of the conflict, the introduction of QM-related strategies had been *ad hoc* and their application and effectiveness highly variable.

> *"Quality is a basic requirement and yet the university only began to consider it less than 6 months ago. It should however be said that when the university realized that [institutional] accreditation was essential, it started to consider the necessary measures."* (Interviewee 4, Uni A).

Although the SIG HE also had no explicit quality-management-related regulations, the question of policies and practices relating to the delivery of 'quality' HE services is nevertheless implicit.

However, as one of the university A interviewees implies, HEC powers are limited and even where regulations exist there are no HEC entities tasked with the verification of compliance of HEC regulations:

> "*The university's affiliation with the Ministry of Higher Education and the Interim Government [SIG] is fictitious, also the Higher Education Council is present in a fictitious form and without any activity, and those present do not have experience in higher education.*" (Interviewee 6 Uni. A).

The absence of any monitoring mechanisms or capacities to monitor to ensure that SIG HEC regulations are being implemented in practice is a major area of risk relative to the quality of all licenced and accredited Syrian universities' educational services. The lack of existing formal QM models or strategies would, however, facilitate the adoption of what is seen as a more appropriate risk-management approach to quality-assurance in conflict-affected environments Couch (2020).

> *"There is no quality management department in the [SIG] Higher Education Council."* (Interviewee 3, Uni A).

4.3. Theme 2. Governance (external and internal), decision-making bodies and processes

4.3.1. External governance and influencing bodies, including funders

SIG HE Council As noted, all Syrian universities in NWS are licenced to operate by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)'s higher education legislative body, the Higher Education Council (HEC). HEC members include the HEC President, three representatives from the North Syrian Lecturers Union, one representative from each of the SIG's ministries of Justice, Education and Local Administration and the Treasury, the President and Vice-President Free Aleppo University (FAU), two representatives of private universities in NWS and the HEC Secretary. HEC decisions and regulations are implemented by the SIG Ministry of Education (MoE), under the supervision of the HEC and its various technical committees. The HEC is supported by five specialist committees: Planning & Policy-making Committee; Curricula Development Committee; Qualification Equivalency Committee; Committee of Oversight for Private Universities; and the Student Affairs Committee. Each committee has between 5 and 10 members made up of academic and non-academic experts who fulfil their roles on a voluntary basis.

Funders. Other external entities include both universities' primary funders whose representatives sit on the universities' respective boards of trustees. Other Board of Trustees members usually include the university's President, Vice President(s) and a number of academics, both faculty and non-faculty, selected on the basis of their speciality relative to the university's faculties, with non-faculty members included in an advisory capacity.

Although the two study universities' funders are represented on respective university Trustee Boards, they have no direct influence over the universities' overall strategy nor its day-to-day operations. Article 3 of University A's governing document states that the SIG HEC is responsible for the university's overall strategy, its organizational and administrative structures, and for the regulations under which the university must operate in respect of all academic, administrative and financial matters. This is the case for all SIG HEC universities in NWS.

One of the key questions raised here is whether the HEC has the capacity to deliver its oversight role. Although this counters HEC regula-

tions and its authority, Interviewee 4 from University 'A' clearly believes that

> "*The Board of Trustees has the strongest authority and can impose any decision."* (Interviewee 4 Uni. A)

4.3.2. Internal governance: roles and responsibilities

Board of Trustees. A university's Board of Trustees is usually responsible for fundraising, the management and audit of funders' contributions and, in the case of private universities, for the nomination of the University President for approval by the SIG Prime Minister. Presidents and Vice Presidents/Faculty Deans of public universities are appointed by the SIG Prime Minister without reference to their Board of Trustees.

The Board of Trustees is seen as an advisory body to the University Council in relation to the development of general university policies, for example, the introduction of new specializations to reflect labour market needs, although both public and private universities need to seek approval by the HEC. Given its fundraising capacity, it also has a major role to play in assuring the universities' finances and sustainability, as well as a role in building connections to other HEIs in the wider international academic community to support academic collaboration, staff and student mobility, as well as access to student scholarship. The development of international connections is also seen as an important step towards international recognition and accreditation.

University Council. Each university has a University Council that is its executive body, chaired by respective Presidents, with Vice Presidents and Faculty Deans as University Council members. Article 11 of University A's governing document states that the President and the University Council are responsible for the management of the university. University B's University Council role was comparable, as confirmed by one of its faculty:

> "*Decisions in University B are usually made by the University Council and circulated to faculties. In some cases, proposals are submitted by the faculty councils to the University Council for approval."* ((Interviewee 11 Uni. B)

All SIG HEC-licenced universities have to refer any proposed substantive changes to the SIG HEC for approval, such as the annual academic calendar, curricula, admission policies, student registration fees etc.

Again, this raises the question of the capacity of the HEC to fulfil its roles and responsibilities and the possibility of over-reliance on licenced university to follow the regulations without external monitoring bodies. In addition, the appointment by the SIG Prime Minister of public universities' Presidents and Vice Presidents/Faculty Deans[2] could raise concerns in terms of due process and lack of transparency, given the absence of any external entity in the selection process, opening up the possibility and accusations of nepotism that might undermine the credibility of the institution and trust in the objectivity and neutrality of the appointee and fears that this might in turn impact on the appointment of others within the institution.

4.3.3. Transparency in decision-making: democratising decision-making

> "*There is no transparency … especially with regard to [decision-making on] financial matters*." (Interviewee 5 Uni. A)

Study interviewees indicated frustration with decision-making processes, raising the importance of their involvement to promote greater transparency and engender a sense of ownership, which in turn would help with retention.

In a crisis situation, top-down management is common, because the development of deliberative or democratic management structures and processes takes time (Şen et al., 2012). However, the two study universities have been in existence for a number of years, so should now be in a position to introduce democratic management practices. Interviewees noted that most decision-making took place at the senior management level, with Deans effectively excluding faculty and departmental staff views due to the lack of faculty councils and departmental boards:

> "*The main decisions are taken at the University Council level without reference to faculty councils or department boards" and "There are no department boards for many disciplines, and the faculty council does not meet regularly.*" (Interviewee 8 Uni. A)

At least 30% of teachers in both study universities didn't have permanent employment contracts at the time of the study, but rather held short-term contracts, including fixed-term renewable annual contracts, that denied them full university-staff status, which in turn excluded them from any institutional bodies, including departmental boards, despite these not being decision-making bodies.

Although the number of the part-time/temporary contracts reflects the financial realities of the institutions' finances, it poses an evident risk relative to staff engagement, commitment and retention and in turn the sustainability of both departments and faculties, as well as the viability of the institution itself, and the potential impact on local labour markets and employment opportunities amongst both academics and students, encouraging further outmigration. At its extreme it could threaten the HE system itself and increase the risk of radicalisation amongst youth in the North of Syria. If the above is an accurate portrayal of the universities' internal structures, i.e. that some of their internal decision-making bodies are not functioning.

As previously noted, the number of university staff (up to 40%) on short-term or part-time contracts would appear to be a factor in the lack of regular faculty and department board meetings, which means that University Councils only receive inputs to their decision-making discussions from faculty deans who sit as members of university councils, rather than faculty deans acting as conduits of opinion from their faculty colleagues. This again points to the importance of ensuring mechanisms to give a voice to faculty and administrative staff in decision-making processes, for the sake of staff morale, commitment to and engagement in the institution and staff retention.

Allied to this is the lack of full-staff status for those without permanent contracts, excluding them from both decision-making bodies and other potential promotion opportunities. Those without permanent contracts are not eligible for consideration for any university roles beyond those they are specifically contracted for. This again undermines motivation amongst what amounts to, in the case of the study universities, over a third of university staff who have not security of tenure, are poorly paid, and are not provided with any sense of belonging or ownership of the institutions for which they work.

4.3.4. Opening of new departments and faculties

Concerns were also raised as to the decision-making processes involved the opening of new departments.

> "*New departments are opened at the university because they are unique [i.e. don't exist elsewhere so won't face competition] regardless of labour-market needs or the availability of [suitably qualified] teaching staff. The opening of new departments appears to be random, rather than based on sound academic considerations.*" (Interviewee 2 Uni B)

Also, it was stated that:

> "*There is a relationship of plans to the local community and that the opening of faculties, such as psychological counselling, is linked to the need of the labour market to its scarcity*." (Interviewee 11 Uni. B)

The opening of new departments and faculties is based on local community/labour market needs, the availability of qualified teachers and infrastructure, and evident interest within the student body (40 minimum) with only one degree offered by each university department.

The implied deviation of practice in relation to the opening of new departments and faculties relative to both SIG HEC and university regulations and procedures, could not be substantiated by the study team.

[2] Vice Presidents are drawn from amongst Faculty Deans.

4.4. Theme 3. Appointment processes and transparency

A number of interviewees expressed concerns about the lack of transparency in the two universities' appointment processes:

"*There is no advertising [for posts] as is required [by the governing regulations] for recruitment and there is no competition. … appointments are made through personal connections ….*" (Interviewee 2 Uni. B)

In addition,

"*There is discrimination in the way university-job opportunities are allocated.*" (Interviewee 13 Uni. B).

4.4.1. Appointment and promotion processes

i. **Internal Appointments and Promotions.**

Department Board Members. Both universities have department boards. Article 43 of University A's *Governing Document* addresses the appointment of department board members – a minimum of 3. These are drawn from amongst the departments' professors, associate professors and assistant professors and nominated by the related Faculty Deans at the start of each academic year on the basis of their seniority. Nominations are referred to the Faculty Council and then the University Council for approval. The role of a department board is to discuss both post-graduate academic and administrative departmental matters such as student registration, suggestions re curricula amendments, departmental staff contracts and promotions, etc.

Faculty Vice Deans. Article 35 of University B's *Procedural Rules* (p. 37) addresses the appointment of Faculty Vice Deans. These are three-year appointments made by the University Council with candidates drawn from amongst Faculty Council members. Private university Presidents propose Faculty Deans to their Board of Trustees for initial approval, prior to ratification by the SIG Higher Education Council. Public university Presidents nominate Faculty Deans directly to the SIG HEC for approval on behalf of their University Council.

ii. **External Appointments.**

"*There are not enough doctoral degree holders amongst the teaching staff.*" (Interviewee 3, Uni A).

"Those with [only] bachelors' or masters' degrees are giving lessons instead of PhD holders due to the lack of specialist teachers." (Interviewee 2, Uni. B).

"There is a shortage of teaching staff and some teachers don't base their study plans on appropriate criteria." (Interviewee 5, Uni. A).

Teaching staff All teaching staff recruitment processes are open and competitive, with recruitment framed in relation to the department not an individual's specialist skills. The opening is advertised on the university's official online sites and various media outlets. However, prior to advertising an opening, whether new or seeking a new incumbent must be approved through a decision by the MoE or HEC. The recruitment process for lecturers are consistent across all SIG licenced universities, e.g. an initial application, interviews of shortlisted candidates by a specially convened committee of relevant individuals, followed by review of the favoured candidates' skills and qualification by a university qualification and equivalency committee to locate them within the department, prior to final confirmation by the MoE.

"It *is proposed to raise the quality level, with … appointments made on the basis of competencies rather than loyalties."* (Interviewee 12, Uni. B).

"Deans and administrative staff are also selected on the basis of [non-academic] criteria such as patience, and ability to withstand work pressure." (Interviewee 8, Uni. A).

"The university and its challenges can only be endured by a few. …. Personal characteristics are as important when it comes to management." (Interviewee 11, Uni. B).

Administrative staff. Unlike teaching staff, all administrative staff have to sit an exam following initial application. Only those who pass the exam are subject to interview. The appointment process thereafter replicates that of teachers, without the final verification of skills and qualifications by a 'qualification and equivalency' committee.

"Appointment practices don't match those of government [regime] universities, which are entirely open." (Interviewee 8 Uni. A)

Current academic recruitment practices only came into full use from late 2018 on. The prior system led by the SIG, inevitably lent itself to accusations of favouritism and loss of trust, it is hoped that the adoption of the current system will counter any such concerns and associated risks. It may also account for the views of Interviewee 6 Universities 'B', that the official open competitive recruitment processes were not being followed in practice.

However, the past and ongoing realities of universities in NWS and the limited pool of qualified Syrian academics on which to draw or who are prepared to work in NWS, did initially lead to the use of personal contacts as a pragmatic response to the appointment of faculty and administrative staff. Whatever the realities, an apparent lack of transparency in recruitment processes has clearly led to perceptions of "favouritism". If 'headhunting' strategies were being used, they should not however result in an overriding of the formal appointment process itself, but rather be used simply to ensure that suitable candidates are available to choose from. Without that formal process, properly applied, appointments will inevitably be the subject of suspicion and open to accusations of nepotism.

If the advertising of posts is not being done in practice, nor formal recruitment/appointment processes followed, then the universities concerned need to understand the detrimental impact of seemingly nepotistic practices, in terms of staff trust, morale and commitment to the institution.

Better internal communication and increased transparency may go some way to avoiding misperceptions, if and where these exist, and help to explain certain approaches being adopted that might appear to be contrary to approved formal appointment procedures, however where practices do not follow formal procedures, it is beholden on both the university and the HE Council, as the compliance monitoring entity, to ensure that such practices do conform.

4.5. Theme 4. Financial insecurity and impacts

The two study universities are dependant on their core funder 'grants' and student fees to cover their costs, including staff salaries. However, these funding bodies are unable to set fixed dates for the payment of their financial contributions, and student fees are also irregular due to the students' own precarious financial situations. This last, includes a considerable number of students who enrol only to find that they are unable to continue paying their fees, forcing universities to identify individual sponsors or wave fees entirely. Such financial uncertainties also make it hard to appoint teachers and administrators on permanent contracts.

"*As a result of the university's deficit, teachers' salaries are delayed in the final months of each year until registration opens and students can be charged fees*." (Interviewee 10, Uni. A).

"Teachers' salaries aren't sufficient for a decent life." (Interviewee 2, Uni. B)

Low staff salaries also reflect the financial insecurities of the two study HEIs, affecting not just staff retention in general, but the ability to attract and retain highly experienced faculty members. Low salaries

also lead to faculty members taking on teaching roles for which they are not qualified, in order to supplement their income.

> *"Salaries are low and teachers in need of increased income so that they accept to teach courses that are not within their specialisation."* (Interviewee 11, Uni. B)

> *"Teachers don't get paid for working overtime."* (Interviewee 4, Uni. A)

Concerns raised by interviewees don't just reflect poor salary levels but also delays in their payment:

> "*As a result of the [university's financial] deficit, teachers' salaries are delayed in the final months of each year, until fees have been collected from students.*" (Interviewee 5, Uni. A)

These findings broadly echo those from earlier studies (Muthanna & Sang, 2018; Raanan, 2009; Symeonidis, 2015; and Milton, 2019) linking quality of education to economic contexts and salaries. During periods of conflict and economic decline, spending on education diminishes. In Syria, this has not just been the case in regime-held territories, which have seen major cuts to the regime's HE budgets Milton (2019), but also in NWS, where the economic situation is much worse. Low salaries and payment delays in NWS reflect circumstance rather than intent. These HEIs work without financial support from the regime and, even when combined, their funders' contributions and modest tuition fees are insufficient to cover their full institutional costs and needs.

> *"Monthly salaries received by teachers are not commensurate with inflation."* (Interviewee 2, Uni. B).

> *"The salaries of administrative staff are very low … which leads them to look for better opportunities."* (Interviewee 3, Uni. A).

If the universities are genuinely unable to offer full time contracts to up to 40% of their staff, then they need to find alternative mechanisms to ensure commitment and retention, which in turn will support delivery of teaching that reflects lecturers' best abilities.

4.6. Theme 5. Divergence between policies and procedures, and practice

> *"Quality is essential. … I can confirm that many of the university's procedures are not compatible with quality management."* (Interviewee 6, Uni. B).

Teacher Evaluation: In addition to the question as to whether recruitment practices as outlined in both HEIs' regulatory documents are being adhered to, interviewees also raised the question of discrepancies between policies and practice in relation to teacher evaluation:

> "*There is no [formal] mechanism to evaluate teaching staff. The evaluation [of teachers] is based mainly on a confidential questionnaire distributed to students.*" (Interviewee 1 Uni. A).

Although both study universities' governing regulations include a 'staff evaluation' clause, it was not being actioned due to the overall shortage of relevant staff.

A study by Symeonidis (2015) found that "teacher status related to aspects of quality education and, more specifically, to socio-cultural and economic contexts, job security, salaries and working conditions…" (Symeonidis, 2015, p.10). It also notes a fall in teacher status in both crisis-affected and European countries facing economic difficulties, even in countries where teachers traditionally enjoy high status as a result of neoliberal trends in education. (Symeonidis, 2015, p.11).

> *"There are no training or development programmes for teaching staff."* (Interviewee 1, Uni. A).

The lack of professional teacher evaluation should be a major area of concern for both study HEIs and the HEC given their purported commitment to ensuring delivery of quality HE.

> *"If students weren't helped with their housing and food, their number would fall to less than half [of its current number]"* (Interviewee 12, Uni. B).

Twenty one percent of graduate-survey respondents confirmed that the choice of their university was influenced by the fee rate.

> *"The assistance provided, including lunch and financial and other material assistance is aimed at ensuring students' commitment."* (Interviewee 12, Uni. B).

4.7. Theme 6. Research

4.7.1. Infrastructural and financial limitations

Although neither of the two study HEIs are research-based, with their primary focus being on teaching, nevertheless they aspire to develop research capacities across the disciplines, and laboratories that are sufficiently well equipped to support applied teaching, as well as to enable research by both students and faculty. When interviewees were asked about research, they noted the constraints of poor infrastructure such as poorly equipped laboratories and a lack of funding.

> "*There is a shortage of infrastructure and practical laboratories. … scientific research is … almost non-existent due to poor funding and insecurity*." (Interviewee 8, Uni. A)

> *"There is no scientific research office in the university … and a lack of funding [to support research]*." (Interviewee 4, Uni. A)

> *"… infrastructure is dilapidated and inappropriate."* (Interviewee 7, Uni. A)

> *"There is no serious scientific research, and post-graduate research can't attain good practical science levels."* (Interviewee 6, Uni. B)

> "*There is a lack of practical laboratory teaching lab hours due to lack of financial support, the necessary infrastructure and technical staff*." (Interviewee 11, Uni. B)

4.7.2. Research and international collaboration

The lack of research at either study university, and universities in NWS in general, deprives them of a potential avenue and opportunity through which to develop collaboration with the wider international academic/scientific community. Interviewees' responses highlighted their interest in, and the value they placed on, research for teaching purposes, as well as for their own research purposes. The lack of research in practical natural science disciplines compromises both study HEIs' ability to deliver a comprehensive curriculum and, in turn, the quality of the HE services being offered.

Contact with international counterparts through research, would facilitate the introduction of practical applications and make a significant difference to the quality of the educational services being offered, as well as enhancing the institutions' credibility in terms of international recognition, and formal accreditation in the longer term.

> "*There are already a good number of faculty members from both study universities who are Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics) Syria Programme affiliates and benefit from the Programme's professional-development and capacity-buildings initiatives relative to both teaching and research, as well as its funding and facilitation of professional connections and research collaboration with experienced colleagues from the wider international academic and scientific communities, professional development opportunities and connections from which both the universities and their students stand to benefit as secondary beneficiaries.*"(Interviewee 12, Uni. B)

4.8. Graduate student survey results and discussion

As noted, the aim of the graduate survey was to obtain the views of 2019–20 graduates from both study universities' relative to the universi-

ties' role in enhancing their employment prospects, as gauged from their current employment status and the nature of that employment relative to their university qualifications. It focused primarily on the question of 'customer satisfaction' as a measure of the quality education services and the universities' understanding of local labour market needs. Customer satisfaction is also an important measure for the universities in terms of its influence on future student enrolment.

The total number of respondents (120) represents of 20% of the two universities combined 2019–20 graduate cohort, The response rate relative to the overall graduate cohort meets the Qualtrics 'sampling confidence' level (Qualtrics, 2020).

4.8.1. Respondent profiles and university affiliations (Questions 1–3)

Gender and age. Survey respondents were split 60% males (72/120) to 40% female (48/120), reflecting the gender divide in the two study universities and highlighting interest amongst both sexes to further their education, with an age range of between 21 and 44.

University affiliation. Of the 120 respondents, 22% (26) were 2019–20 graduates from university 'A' and 78% (94) were 2019–20 from university B. These percentages are proportionate to the number of students in each university.

Employment status. 59 were employed, another 18 in some form of part-time employment, with the remaining 43 unemployed at the time of the study.

4.8.2. Question 4. Motivation for chosing to pursue he studies

The majority of respondents selected multiple-choice options that related to advancing their status in life and their life chances, including ambition to secure employment reflecting their interests and desired salary. Only 5 respondents enroled in university to please or emulate their parents. A further 6 had done so to emulate friends.

Eighty-six percent of respondents' noted that their decision to enrol in HE had not been subject to external influence. Only 5% had consulted friends, demonstrating a strong sense of self-determination

4.8.3. Question 5. Information sources at the time of enrolment?

The main sources from which respondents obtained information on the universities at the time of their enrolment were friends (31%) and the university itself, either through a visit to the university (19%), by phoning the university (19%), by speaking to students during a university visit (9%), the university website (9%), or from university brochures (2%). Social media (11%), was less influential.

4.8.4. Question 6. University selection?

Eleven respondents were advised by their parents and six by friends and the remaining 103 did not specify the reason for their selection referring only to objective sources of information as having influenced their choices.

4.8.5. Question 7. Satisfaction with university teaching and knowledge gained?

Six respondents were fully satisfied with the level of knowledge that they gained from their university degree, forty-seven were only partly satisfied, and seventeen were disatisfied.

4.8.6. Question 8. Relevance of your degree to your job?

All 59 respondents who were in full-time employment believed that their degree was directly relevant to their work.

4.8.7. Question 9. Do you believe that your salary is commensurate with that of a graduate?

Only 6 out the 59 employed respondents said yes, 13 were ambivalent and the remaining 40 did not believe that their salaries were commensurate.

4.8.8. Question 10. What were the most influencial factors relating to your study?

These could include multiple choices. Teaching & teachers (78); Low tuition fees (26); Course structure (26); Administrative staff (25); Location/Proximity (22); Available degree courses (20); Infrastructure (9); and Other (9).

Teaching quality. Teaching and teachers were overwhelmingly (65%) the most important factors reflecting very positively on the quality of teaching at both study universities.

The selection of tuition fees as an important factor (22%) very likely reflects the difficult financial situation of many students. The location of a university (21%) is another important factor, both in terms of access, insecurity and the cost of public transport. Many students are unable to continue their studies due to limited finances. Only 8% rated infrastructure as a positive factor, reflecting the realities of the two study universities and their limited and unstable finances, their insecure contexts and the lack of purpose-built buildings and appropriate infrastructure such as strudent accommodation and laboratories in particular, all of which is inevitably poor by most HE standards.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The absence of explicit quality management models and strategies within either the HE Council or the two study universities' documentation, reflects not just the complex fragile environment in which the sector has evolved since 2015, but also the absence of any QM tradition in Syria prior to the conflict and, as a result, little understanding as to the benefits of QM strategies as a tool to enhance the quality of higher education services.

However, six years on, with a good number of Syrian universities in NWS now reasonably well established, the absence of any existing formal QM model should be seen as an opportunity to introduce a more appropriate model than the standard Western models developed for stable environments, which are being adopted across the world, including inappropriately in conflict-affected countries and environments.

Although no explicit quality-management strategies and policies were identified, nevertheless the study revealed numerous areas of risk that were either already impacting negatively on the two study HEIs' ability to deliver quality higher education, or that had the potential to do so in future. Identified risks sit within the classic categories associated with HEIs in fragile and unstable contexts, identified in previous studies as 'academic', 'strategic', 'financial', 'operational', and 'reputational' (Raanan, 2009; Toma et al., 2014).

To be of immediate relevance, the conceptualisation of QM in conflict-affected contexts needs to locate context at its heart. A risk-management approach to QM responds to a common desire to avoid potential risks, with a vital first step when adopting a risk-management approach, to identify and categorise the risks. Understanding the issues that influence or hinder the success of QM strategies is crucial to improving their effectiveness so that understanding the nature of risks faced and their magnitude can allow stakeholders to address them, or at least to develop mitigation strategies. Risk management is "a planned and a structured process aimed at helping the project team make the right decision at the right time to identify, classify, quantify the risks and then to manage and control them" (Srinivas, 2018). He also suggests that risks can be better controlled if they are identified in the first instance and a well-structured mitigation strategy developed.

Management & Decision-making. Actual lack of transparency or perceptions of lack of transparency in decision-making and recruitment could be addressed by introducing a more democratic management style, central to which democratic decision-making structures.

Democratisation. Modebelu & Anebi (2012) see effective institutional management as central to mitigating the risks affecting delivery of quality HE, necessitating the organisation and mobilisation of an institution's entire human (academic and non-academic staff), material (facilities etc.) and financial resources. Gulden et al., 2020 also suggest that

to achieve this in a harmonised relaxed working environment requires cohesion across the entire university structure, i.e. departments, divisions, faculties and chairs, as well as administrative and teaching staff. Şen et al. (2012) point to the importance of democratic management practices, including democratic ownership, authority and responsibility, group decision-making, a horizontal network organizational structure, and the value of continual long-term employment within an institution. When applied simultaneously, these factors should promote delivery of high-quality education and the development of a high-quality university (Şen et al., 2012).

Staffing Risks: Recruitment, Retention, Motivation and Commitment. If the advertising of posts is not being done in practice, nor formal recruitment/appointment processes followed, then the universities concerned need to understand the detrimental impact of seemingly nepotistic practices, in terms of staff trust, morale and commitment to the institution. Democratisation could also be extended to recruitment with the introduction of a recruitment panel of qualified management and teaching staff to review and agree the appointment of candidates.

Part-time contracts. Although the number of the part-time contracts reflects the financial realities of the institutions' finances, having 30% to 40% of HEIs' staff on such contracts poses an evident risk relative to staff engagement, commitment and retention and, in turn, the sustainability of both departments and faculties, as well as the viability of the institution itself, and the potential impact on local labour markets and employment opportunities amongst both academics and students, encouraging further outmigration from Syria. Management should consider amending existing regulations relating to the status of those employed on short-term contracts to enable them to participate in departmental and faculty boards.

Importance of meeting labour market needs

It is important for both universities, when opening new departments, to conduct a survey of the labour market need so that students can work within their specialization. The survey showed that the qualification of 85% of the 59 students who got a job was relevant to their work. Evidence of employment success amongst university's graduates, enhances the university's reputation and likelihood of increased enrolment numbers.

Transparency Greater transparency and honesty about the realities faced and the resulting limitations would help to promote understanding and raise morale amongst faculty. Increasing salaries to a sufficient level to support individual living costs and attract quality teaching staff is another important challenge requiring the development of a clear strategy to draw in new funders or open the way to more dependable funding.

Financial Insecurity. A major 'risk' impeding longer-term planning is the institutions' financial uncertainties. Funders should be asked to guarantee sums and payment dates to enable HEIs to engage in longer-term planning, and strategies developed to bring on board new funders.

Increasing income opportunities for teaching staff. Opportunities need to be created to enable teaching staff to supplement their limited income. The addition of 'evening classes' to increase student enrolment for students unable to study during standard hours, might open up income streams and institutional income, to benefit staff.

Compliance risks. The apparent over-reliance of the HEC on its licenced universities to follow HEC regulations without external monitoring bodies is likely to the result in an increase in non-compliant practices relative to policies and procedural regulations. The absence of any HEC monitoring mechanisms or capacities to monitor, to ensure that SIG HEC regulations are being implemented in practice, represents a major area of risk relative to the quality of all SIG HEC licenced and accredited Syrian universities' educational services, as does the failure to evaluate teaching staff.

Teacher Evaluation and Professional development. The HEC needs to build its capacity to oversee implementation of its regulations, including the regular evaluation of teaching staff in its licenced and accredited HEIs to avoid any drop-in standards and teaching quality. HEIs should collaborate to develop and deliver joint professional development programmes for their staff, to invest in their capacity-building in order to enhance the quality of teaching. This should be seen as an investment in the quality of their educational services as well as a means to build institutional loyalty and commitment amongst staff and enhance their institutional reputations in the wider international community.

Community relations. Universities have a role to play in carrying out needs assessment within the local community and in developing outward facing programmes in response. A useful strategy for building allegiance between local communities and HEIs which would mitigate the risk of competition from other HEIs. The role of the SIG and the SIG HE Council need to be bolstered to ensure that both can better support the goals of the HEIs in NWS including their community facing roles.

Partnerships with other HEIs in NWS. partnerships with other HEIs in NW Syria to avoid competition and collectively deliver a wider range of discipline and degree options to avoid stretching limited resource unnecessarily with a primary, focus on teaching in the first instance rather than trying to extend into research for research sake. To avoid the weakness in research HEI should Use brokers such as Cara to connect HEIs to reputable universities that might well be willing to support the institutions in key areas and establish a forum/platform that brings together universities in NWS.

A coordinated response. The SIG HEC needs to use its convening power to bring together its licenced and accredited HEIs in NWS to implement the collective development of a risk-management approach to quality management from which all HEIs in NWS will stand to benefit.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix A. Documents shared by the study universities (A & B)

University A

1. Procedural Rules: Terms and mechanism for registering students
3. Publishing research in university A
4. Specifications for printing postgraduate theses
5. Conditions for admission of students with an educational qualification diploma
6. Conditions for suspending student registration
7. Disciplinary and examination penalties
8. University regulations
9. Syrian Interim Government Staff Regulations
10. Students' semester schedule
11. Terms and rules for student transfer to the university
14. Faculty members are appointed
15. Approval of the teaching plan
15. Standards for promoting faculty members
15. Determining the teaching load for faculty members, technical staff and teaching assistants
15. Teaching hour fees
15. Opening a department
16. Cancelling or changing a subject
17. Approval of memoranda of understanding between the university and other parties
18. University fees reduction or exemptions for some cases
19. Promotion of faculty and technical staff
20. Determining the admission requirements for postgraduate students in each academic year

21 Certificate Equivalency Decisions
23. Adoption of a teaching plan for faculties and institutes
25. Determining the general rules for supervising master's and doctoral theses
26+36. Teaching materials in the faculty or specialized institute
27. Opening the department of laboratories in faculties and institutes
28. Opening Postgraduate Program (Master)
29. Formation of the disciplinary committee
30. Appointing a faculty member
33. The University Council's meeting is periodic, at least 2 per month
34. Adoption of the teaching plan for the Master of Postgraduate Studies
35. Formation of a committee to discuss masters and doctoral theses
36. Nomination of supervisors for master's and doctoral theses
38. Registration of a master's or doctoral research plan
39. The appointment of the university president is issued
40. PhD thesis registration
41. Faculty boards
42. Conferring masters and doctoral degrees
    - Doc. 7 - 2006 Law 6 'Organization of Universities'
    - Doc. 8 - large extracts from the 2006 Law.
    - Doc. 8. Article 3. the SIG HEC responsibility for universities' overall strategies, organizational and administrative structures, etc.
    - Doc. 8. Article 11. University A's governing document
    - Doc. 45. SIG Decision 4 published on 12/04/2017, on licensing private universities
    - Article 35 of University B's *Procedural Rules* (p.37), addresses the appointment of Faculty Vice Deans

University B

1. Procedures Rules: University admissions
2. Rules for Promotion
3. Procedures Rules: Disciplinary Procedures
4. Procedures Rules: Student transfer between universities
5. Procedures Rules: University calendar
6. Procedures Rules: Adopting a teaching plan
7. Procedures Rules: Subject transfer across semesters
8. Procedures Rules: Introducing a replacement course
9. Procedures Rules: Terms of appointment
10. Procedures Rules: Appointment mechanism
11. Procedures Rules: Promotion
12. Procedures Rules: Postgraduate application

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